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ABSTRACT

The role of school-related stress in the life of the disabled child is examined, and parents and teachers are given suggestions to reduce stress and help the child cope. Stress is defined as the emotional and physical reaction to the pressures that society places upon the child to conform and live up to expectations. Among sources of stress are unrealistic parental expectations, making friends, and adapting to change. The signs of stress include withdrawal reaction, regression reaction, displacement reaction, fears and phobias, physical illness, and attention-seeking reactions. Parents can reduce or prevent stress by organizing the household; organizing the child's daily activities; helping the child build friendships; teaching the child to label or express feelings; and making sure the child has the right diet, adequate amounts of sleep, exercise, and adequate health care. "Do's" and "Don'ts" for parents include anticipating potentially stressful experiences, not assuming everyone else is the wrongdoer, and being consistent with household rules. Teachers are encouraged to provide daily opportunities for success, develop peer tutor programs, and design innovative homework assignments. Also offered are suggestions for dealing with teacher stress in such areas as paperwork, peer support, and salary. (DB)

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Special Parent ★Special Child★

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SCHOOL-RELATED STRESS AND THE SPECIAL CHILD

Both parents and teachers share the expectation that the school-age child will regard school as a source of challenge and fulfillment. When, on the other hand, the child appears frustrated or finds school a struggle then all concerned experience a sense of disappointment and dismay. Special children, because of the nature of their disability, frequently find the demands of age or grade level academic and social achievement required at school to be a source of pain and stress. In this issue we will focus on recognizing school-related stress in your child and how best to cope in order to maximize his or her potential for learning.

What is stress?

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Linda Murphy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Stress is the emotional and physical reaction to the pressures that society places upon us to conform and live up to expectations. Not all forms of stress are necessarily harmful. A certain amount of stress is healthy because it motivates us to perform at a certain level of achievement. Thus, the child who understands that not handing in her homework results in staying in at recess finds this type of stress encourages productivity. It is unwise to protect your child from *all* stress because she will never learn how to handle what is expected of her. However, when the demands placed on a child continually exceed what she is actually capable of doing, then unhealthy levels of stress can ensue. A high degree of emotional and physical turmoil will compromise her chances for school success.

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Sources of stress

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Linda Murphy, M.S., is the founder and for the past 15 years has been the director of a widely known, approved school for mentally handicapped children serving children ages 5-21 in Westchester County, NY, and surrounding areas. A lecturer, teacher and administrator, she is a foster parent and the parent of a handicapped child, too.

Suzanne Della Corte, M.S., for 15 years co-director of the school, is responsible for curricula, staff development and supervision. She is author of numerous research projects in the field and has edited psychology textbooks for a leading New York publisher.

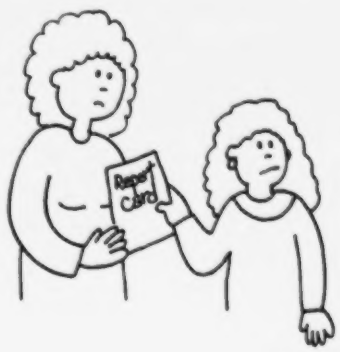
Special children by definition have learning problems. Their pace is erratic, they often learn slowly, requiring frequent repetition of the same material or the same material presented over and over in different ways. Ideally, the teacher has set realistic goals for each child's academic and social achievement based on a sensitive assessment of the youngster's unique strengths and weaknesses. Hopefully this results in a school program that challenges but does not overwhelm. However, the demands placed on special children to achieve at grade level and to excel on standardized test scores frequently produce the opposite.

The special child who strives to put forth her best efforts but is unable to measure up often experiences a demoralizing and unnecessary sense of failure.

Unfortunately, unrealistic **parental expectations** complicate the sad picture. Parents who demand that their special child be like everyone else or compete at the same level as others can endanger their child's self-confidence. By the same token, special children are often adept at sensing their parents' inner anxiety over their progress at school. Thus, anxious comments made by parents about school work, grades, promotions or dubious concerns of what the future holds all contribute to the child's sense of failure and foreboding.

Making friends. The pressure to be accepted and liked by others is felt by all children, typical or not. However, the special child often has more difficulty in establishing satisfactory relationships and thus has a greater chance of feeling left out. Some special children attend schools or programs outside of the neighborhood which makes the task of forming or sustaining friendships even more difficult. Feelings of rejection combined with not living up to expectations at home and school can all build up and contribute to unhealthy stress levels.

Adapting to change is yet another source of stress—even change for the better—simply because it is different. Special children must often adapt to changes in school placement or adjust to new therapists, specialists or different schedules, adding to the likelihood that even more stress will result.



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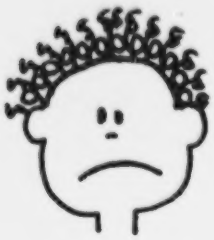
Signs of stress



Children who are experiencing unhealthy levels of stress react in a variety of ways. The type and intensity vary from child to child.

Withdrawal reaction. Some children react to stress by withdrawing or avoiding social interaction, including sports or activities that they previously had found enjoyable. Others handle situations that are perceived as stressful with an overall passivity characterized by refusal to respond or interact with others. Excessive day dreaming, sleeping jags, dawdling or inattention are often noted.

Regression reaction. Other children retreat into immature or infantile behavior patterns. Thumbsucking, reverting to baby talk and toileting accidents are characteristic.

Displacement reaction. Children who continually blame others, finding fault with the class, the teacher and their classmates or who make claims, for example, that "their brain is injured" are all projecting their sense of stress and failure on to external factors.

Fears and phobias. Some children feel so overwhelmed by school work that they are unable to finish one assignment and continue on to the next page. In extreme cases children can develop a generalized school phobia, causing them to appear paralyzed or to be unable to board the school bus or attend class.

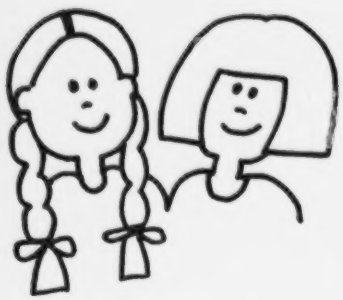
Physical illness. Often children actually become physically ill. This reaction can be sporadic, cropping up on Monday mornings, for example, or can be of such long duration as to be health-threatening. Stress-related illnesses include headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite,

backaches, cramps. Other physical symptoms include excessive crying spells, nervous laughter, bedwetting, nail biting, tics, sleeping jags, nightmares, other sleep disturbances, teeth grinding, excessive eating or food binging. Psychological counseling along with medical attention is indicated in extreme cases.

Children with stress-related illnesses are *not* malingerers and the distress and discomfort of their physical and psychic pains are all too real. Even when the symptoms disappear at 10:00 am after the child is allowed to remain at home it must be noted that the pangs *were real*. It is only when the child can stay home that the stress-related symptoms evaporate.

Attention-seeking reaction. Some children resort to other devices in order to mask their inadequacies. The "class clown," for example, controls the environment with outlandish antics. Not only does the class clown avoid school work, she is able to garner peer approval and attention in this fashion. The disruptive child who is sent to the principal's office gains secondary reinforcements—not only does she get out of class but she usually can find an adult to chat with!

Ways to reduce or prevent stress



The best preventive to the debilitating effects of school stress is to provide your special child with a consistent, positive, organized environment where there is a time and place for everything. Special children are notoriously unable to plan effectively or organize their time productively. The homework that is done helter-skelter or not at all, chores and responsibilities left to the last minute or forgotten entirely, lost or misplaced books, assignments and homework are typical complaints. This is not a deliberate attempt to annoy the adults in charge; instead it is symptomatic of the special child who is easily confused, does not process directions adequately or is unable to determine the length of time it takes to accomplish tasks.

Organize the household. Instead of wasting valuable time in endless confrontations with your special child it's best to provide your child with the framework she cannot provide herself. This entails arranging household schedules so that chores, meals, leisure activities and bedtime are part of a consistent routine everyone feels comfortable with. Build enough time into the daily schedule so that no one in the family feels rushed or pressured. Unexpected delays or changes won't disrupt the schedule when you have more time than is necessary.

Organize your child's daily activities so that her responsibilities are as predictable as possible. Knowing or understanding what comes next in the daily schedule reduces stress. Make sure your child is not over-programmed. Rushing her through dinner to engage in a round of Scouts or clubs after a full day of classes along with after-school tutoring, lessons or therapy creates internal havoc. All children need a time to digest the day's events, read, relax, chat on the phone or just putter around.

Give your child enough time to complete household chores and homework. Keep in mind that it is characteristic of special children to require more time than others.

Make sure your special youngster has a consistent time of the day for doing homework with her own desk, a good reading light and everything close at hand—books, papers, pencils, etc. Help your child make a written schedule and jot down events on a calendar.

Developing organizational skills is time consuming but a far better alternative than a haphazard, chaotic lifestyle.

Help build friendships. Many special children feel excluded or rejected by others. Having a friend—someone with whom to share confidences or enjoy similar pastimes—creates a degree of self-worth that in itself reduces school stress. Help your special child make friends by encouraging her to invite others over. Attendance at different schools can necessitate complicated car pools and sleepovers but is well worth it.

Help your child develop the skills necessary to make her sought after by others. A bossy child who refuses to share toys or belongings is unlikely to have friends. Encourage her to play fairly, share with others, cooperate and listen to others. Very often these traits that other children pick up on their own must be taught to the special child. Playing board games with your child at home is one way of instilling turn-taking, sharing, winning and losing gracefully. After-school and Saturday recreational programs are good ways to gain experience in the pleasures of play.

Teach your child to label or express her feelings. When your child comes home from school

unhappy but has no way of expressing her pent-up emotions, chances are that her stress is clouded with depression or hostility. Be a good listener, tune in carefully to what your child is saying and how she looks. Slumped shoulders, teary eyes and quavery voice are tell-tale signs of disappointment and rejection. Help her to define and identify the problems. No child enjoys a daily interrogation or wishes to offer a blow-by-blow description of her school day, but *will* respond if provided with a positive atmosphere where confidences can be exchanged.

Your child needs your support—sometimes a hug, kiss or affectionate pat can be a great stress-reliever to an overwrought child. Talk about happy or unhappy feelings. Encourage her to use her imagination in expressing herself—for example, pretending she is the teacher or acting out troubling events. Tell her what it was like when you went to school; perhaps she will take comfort in stories about your similar experiences.

Above all get it across to your child that you appreciate and admire her efforts to achieve at school.

Make it clear that working at a slower pace is not disgraceful and that everyone makes mistakes—that's why pencils have erasers!

Physical reducers of stress, include insuring your child gets a proper diet, adequate sleep, the right amount of exercise and adequate health care. The *right diet* includes plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains such as whole wheat bread, milk and lean meat and fish. Cola drinks, sweets, caffeine and sugary foods are all considered as "empty" calories because they lack nutrition. Fatty foods, refined sugar and processed foods that have a high degree of salt and additives are also non-essential. An inadequate diet subtly undermines your child's physical well-being. Feeling poorly and run down adds to the stress factor. Pack your child's lunch box with healthy foods—raisins, yogurt, salad in a cup.

Adequate amounts of sleep reduce stress. Jittery nerves, over reaction to noise, hyperactivity or attention span difficulties indicate lack of rest. Your child should have regular bedtime hours, and a period of calm activity before lights out. Overstimulating or violent TV programs should be avoided. Prolonged sleeplessness or difficulty staying asleep should receive medical attention.

Exercise is especially helpful to children who are stressed because adherence to a regular exercise program both energizes and relaxes. Exercise promotes physical well-being and is a well documented antidote to stress. In order to maximize the benefits, such activities as swimming, walking, jogging, bicycling, working out to exercise tapes, following aerobic records should become a daily habit. Most of these activities can be enjoyed together as a family.

Adequate health care is essential to rule out any physical cause that can add to stress feelings. An annual physical examination insures there are no physical reasons undermining your child's ability to learn.

Do's and don'ts

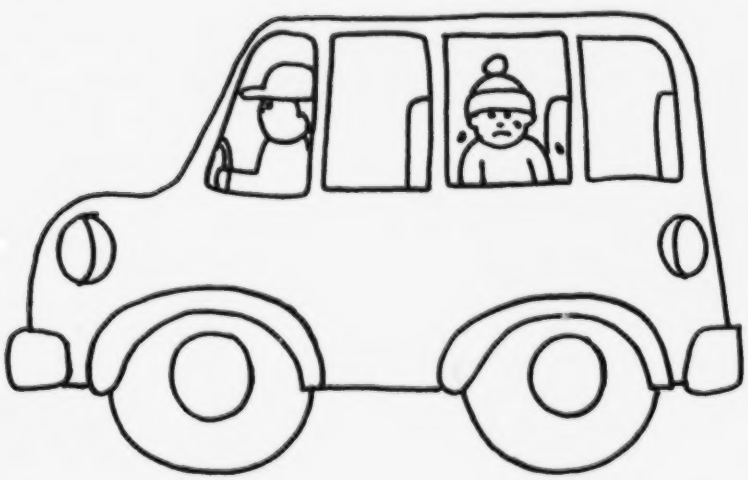
Do anticipate any potentially stressful experiences and discuss this ahead of time. A new teacher, a new school or program needs a get-acquainted visit to offset the stress of the unexpected. Knowing what to expect is always reassuring and helpful.

Do make sure your child is aware that other children experience school stress and that she is not alone in feeling overwhelmed or ill-at-ease at times.

Don't allow your child to blame everyone else for difficulties at school or lack of achievement. Help her to find ways in which she can perform with competence. Constantly absolving your child from taking responsibility for her own actions undermines her feelings of self-worth.

Don't assume everyone else is the wrongdoer. Find out all the facts and ask how school and home can work together.

Do treat your child's anxiety with respect. Don't dismiss her feelings or problems as unimportant or overblown until you have all the facts at your disposal. Anxiety, even if unfounded, signals something is wrong and warrants your asking school personnel for help.



Do remember that parents who fight each and every battle for their child inadvertently convey the message that the child is unable to handle things on her own. This undermines her self-confidence and adds to discomfort and stress.

Do learn to differentiate between a legitimate concern connected with your child's school performance and your own anxiety about grade level achievement. This is transmitted to your child as pressure and stress.

Do be consistent with household rules and regulations. Children thrive on limit setting that is fairly meted out and do their best when they fully realize what is expected of them.

Do consider your child's teacher as an ally. Don't sabotage the school's efforts with negative comments or a hostile attitude. Try working together, ask for school policy on having conferences and sharing ideas.

Do accept your child's limitations. If you have not truly accepted her disability, she can't either and both of you will wind up feeling disappointed and stressed.

Do focus on your child's strengths. Take every opportunity to enhance her self-esteem with verbal praise, as long as it is genuine. Help your child by emphasizing her strong points. See your child as a child with a handicapping condition, not as a handicapped child.

Tips for teachers

by Terry Callahan

Performance expectations and academic achievement are key elements in today's society. As a result, school-related stress may occur because of undue pressure unknowingly placed upon the special child by family, friends, classmates and even the classroom teacher.

How much pressure does the special child need for success in school? For the classroom teacher, it is a difficult question that must be addressed as individually as the instructional plan for each student. What is tolerable for one student and helps her to thrive may be disastrous to another. The teacher should develop and communicate the philosophy to her students that each one of them is a worthwhile individual deserving of respect and acceptance, regardless of level of ability. Using instructional and motivational strategies, the teacher can enhance learning and reduce stress by:

- providing opportunities—no matter how small—for daily success and recognizing such improvement by sending frequent verbal praise to parents, awarding ribbons, etc.
- developing peer tutor programs which can serve the dual purpose of reducing stress in one student while enhancing self-esteem in another
- making instruction relevant to the student rather than seemingly meaningless and abstract
- developing innovative homework assignments and projects that the student can complete successfully without feeling pressured.

Additionally, the classroom teacher should be constantly on the alert for both subtle and overt changes in students' behavior patterns, frequent headaches, stomach aches or nausea and development of unusual mannerisms and/or tics, all of which may be manifestations of stress. Remember, the key to successfully reducing school-based stress is early recognition and intervention.

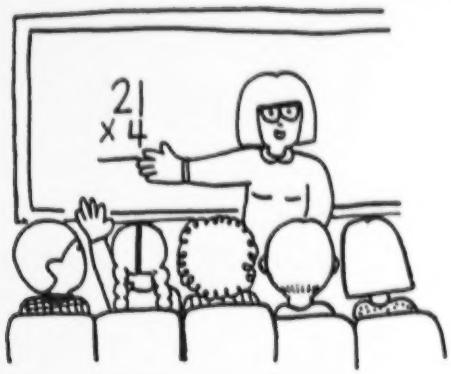
PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER

Teacher stress

by George Popper, Ph. D.

Being a teacher is not easy, even under the best of circumstances. Unmotivated and undisciplined students, low pay, antiquated equipment and unresponsive administration and parents are common problems that are often more severe for the special education teacher.

Much has been said and written about stress in the work place. It is known, for example, that an employee under stress is less effective, less productive and more likely to suffer from a variety of psychological and physical ailments. Many organizations have established programs to deal with the stress-related problems facing their workers. What are some of the unique problems confronting the special education teacher?



Paperwork. In this day and age, paperwork seems to be a fact of life and can take on epidemic proportions for the special education teacher. There are not only report cards, but detailed evaluations and reports that must be written routinely. Learning to pace onself so that the work doesn't become overwhelming is one solution.

Teacher expectations and student motivation. Teachers teach and students learn. With the special student, however, things are not as clearly defined. The rate of learning is often slower and erratic. Frequently, concepts taught one minute are forgotten the next, a situation with a high degree of frustration for teachers. When, despite a teacher's best efforts, their students do not learn, teachers feel they are not really accomplishing anything, a perception reinforced when standardized tests reveal that progress has been very slow. If the frustrations are of sufficient severity and duration, teacher motivation can decline. When this happens, *students do even less well* and a vicious circle is created.

To deal with this very complex problem, teachers need to have complete information on all of their students. They must have the opportunity to meet with the school psychologist and other professionals to discuss each student in detail in terms of test findings, their implications and the kind of program each student requires.

Peer support. Teachers supporting other teachers can be a very effective mechanism for coping with the day-to-day rigors of the classroom and improving teacher morale. One suggestion is to develop regular teacher support group meetings conducted by the psychologist or other professional skilled in working with groups. Such meetings would provide teachers with a forum to discuss and resolve problems and feelings encountered on the job.

Administrative support. A close rapport with administration is essential to teacher and student success. Teachers need to feel that the administration supports their efforts. When teachers feel free to discuss their problems, they tend to feel better about what they are trying to accomplish. Sometimes teachers just need to know their supervisor cares enough about them to take a real interest in what they are doing.

Administrators should also review state and local mandates with the teachers who must carry them out, helping to alleviate stress by providing clear guidelines and instructions.

Salary is a chronic problem with no easy answers. Parents who want their children to have a quality education need to take an active role in seeing that their tax dollars are wisely spent. More than anything, teachers need to know that administrators, parents and the faculty as a whole recognize the critically important job they do. Teachers must feel that they are an integral part of the team and that their work is properly appreciated.

Illustrations by Leah Spring